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# MACBETH

A Warning Against Superstition



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A WARNING AGAINST SUPERSTITION

BY

ESTHER GIDEON NOBLE

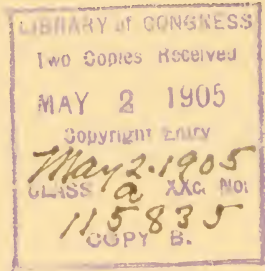


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## MACBETH, A WARNING AGAINST SUPERSTITION

The great message conveyed by the tragedy Macbeth is a warning against superstition, or a perversion of the imagination. Shakespeare was so far in advance of his time that the greatest scientific truths were well known to him many years before they were hit upon by their so-called discoverers. That he believed in witches or supernatural agents of any kind is impossible. Shakespeare was essentially a dramatist. He was also an actor and a shrewd, practical business manager, who knew well how to catch the pennies of the "groundlings" and the pounds of the "judicious" *one*. His plays were written for presentation. Macbeth seems to have been written for immediate presentation. Shakespeare's policy was "to show the very age and body of the time his form and pressure," and "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." The Weird Sisters were treated

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as positive objects, and introduced at the beginning of the play for dramatic effect, at a time when even the King and high dignitaries of state believed in them, when witches (so-called) were being legally burned at the stake, and no woman or man could be sure of immunity from arrest on a charge of witchcraft.

To admit the material existence of the Weird Sisters and that Macbeth was incited to murder by them would rob the play of its purpose, with which in view Shakespeare made Macbeth distinctly a man of thought, calculation and caution. *It is the abuse, the misdirection of this great power for thought which makes the tragedy.* The first words Macbeth speaks establish the fact that the witches are but an echo of his own thoughts. That they have said more than he does in this particular place is not significant. He gives the key to the situation by suggestion: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." Macbeth has just won a great victory in battle;

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therefore, to him, the day is "fair." This victory has given life to a latent ambition. It was the fashion of the time for any one who entertained a hope to seek to have it confirmed by supernatural means. The time and place best adapted to such a purpose were a lonely spot and a tempest, for it was, according to popular belief, "in thunder, lightning and in rain" that supernatural agents most easily manifested. All this and the object of the visit of Macbeth and Banquo to the heath is told in the one word "foul."

During the course of the play it is shown that Macbeth's mind is steeped in superstition. There is not a single instance in which the witches do more than "harp" his "fear aright," or give utterance to a belief or idea which he does not entertain.

### ACT III. SCENE IV.

"It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood;

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Stones have been known to move and trees  
to speak; (\*)

Augurs and understood relations have  
By magot-pies and choughs and rooks  
brought forth

The secret'st man of blood."—

shows how he is imbued with old and then  
popular superstitions.

### ACT IV. SCENE I.

"I cónjure (†) you by that which you pro-

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(\*) Note the superstition in regard to trees. Stones may "move" but trees only "speak."

(†) I accent the word cónjure on the first syllable and interpret and use it in the sense "to practice magical arts," advisedly. I quote the Clarendon Press Editors as authority for the statement that: "Cónjure seems to be used by Shakespeare always with the accent on the first syllable, except in *Romeo and Juliet*, II.i.26, and *Othello*, I.iii.105. In both these passages he uses 'con-júre.' In all other cases he uses cónjure whether he means (1) 'adjure' (2) 'conspire' or (3) 'use magic arts.'"

Troilus and Cressida: Act IV. Scene III.

Tro. Was Cressid here?

Ulyss. I cannot cónjure, Trojan.

Tro. She was not, sure.

Ulyss. Most sure she was. (She must have been here because you saw her and I cannot cónjure.)

Tro. Why, my negation hath no taste of *madness*.

Ulyss. Nor mine, my lord. Cressid was here but now.

(Macbeth not only believed he could cónjure, but came to have the taste of madness.)

T. & C. Act II. Sc. III.

Thersites. 'Sfoot, I'll learn to cónjure and raise devils, but I'll see some issue of my spiteful execrations.

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fess, etc.," is extremely significant. Up to this time Macbeth has heard none of the incantations of the witches to which the *audience* has been treated, but he *knows* them. He believes in witchcraft and considers himself a conjurer.

### ACT II. SCENE II.

Macbeth is shown to have accepted that religion which makes it possible for a man to commit the most heinous crimes and receive absolution on his death bed or on his way to execution. With his hands still dripping with the blood of his own cousin, the innocent and inoffensive Duncan, Macbeth was surprised and shocked because "Amen" stuck in his throat when another innocent victim cried "God bless us!" "But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen?' I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' stuck in my throat." Such superstition as this is little short of insanity. But Shakespeare has already shown

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that Macbeth is not insane at this time. In the last scene of the preceding Act, viz. Act I, Sc. VII, Macbeth coolly, quietly and thoughtfully calculates the reasons for and against detection and punishment here. He has no fear of the life to come because he can make his arrangements for the next world at his own convenience. If he die a natural death he can ask a "blessing" and say "Amen" at the last moment. If killed in battle or suddenly by accident, he still has his Purgatory. Had this power of analysis, this capacity for mental appreciation, been cultivated and kept clean of the rank growth of superstition which finally chokes and kills it, Macbeth's mind would have retained its balance.

Reverting to Act I. Sc. I, there is nothing in this scene to justify the belief that Macbeth and Banquo really see, or fully believe they see anything. Both are seeking to learn the future by supernatural means. Their minds are working together. Both are successful generals under a weak king, and the

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crown is not entailed, though Macbeth stands nearer to the line of natural succession than Banquo. Neither fears the succession of the king's sons, because they have never distinguished themselves in any way, and, Duncan out of the way, the people will be more than likely to bestow the crown upon a great military hero. Banquo is more interested in the matter of royal succession than Macbeth because he has a son and Macbeth is childless; hence Banquo imagines he sees the witches *first*. Banquo and Macbeth *know* that one or the other will be likely to succeed to the title and estate of the vanquished traitor, Cawdor; Macbeth being the more probable recipient because he is cousin to the king; so Macbeth imagines this prophecy. It is a phase of intellectual dishonesty peculiar to the ignorant superstitious which induces a feigned surprise and astonishment at the perfectly natural and expected consequence of a natural and known cause.

Banquo reveals the unreality of the witches

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when he asks: "Were such things here as we do speak about?" And Macbeth admits that "nothing is but what is not." There has been no "suggestion" save that which exists in his own mind, whose "thought" is "murther."

The witches do not foretell the death of Banquo to either because it had not occurred to Macbeth that this murder would ever become necessary to his own safety, and Banquo is not aware that his life is in danger. Had Macbeth fully believed in the existence of the witches and their prophecies, he would have believed it would be useless to attempt to murder Fleance.

### ACT I. SCENE VI.

Banquo is shown to be a man of thought, refinement and imagination:

"This guest of summer,  
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve  
By his lov'd mansionry that the heaven's  
breath  
Smells wooingly here; no jutty, frieze,



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Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird  
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant  
    cradle:

Where they most breed and haunt, I have ob-  
    serv'd

The air is delicate."

But he also shows his deliberate treachery to Duncan in failing to warn him of Macbeth's design which, in Act II. Sc. I, it is plainly shown he knows. In this scene Banquo sets aside Macbeth's insincere remark in regard to the unfitness of his castle for the reception of the king, with the peremptory two words "All's well," and follows it with a terse statement of the one thing of interest to both: "I dreamt last night of the three Weird Sisters: To you they have showed some truth." Macbeth's first impulse, as usual, is to lie: "I think not of them," but he knows it is useless to try to deceive Banquo on that point, and on second thought decides to sound him; to learn if possible exactly what Banquo's attitude to-

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ward him will be in the event of the fulfillment of his wicked plans. Up to this time the understanding between them has been tacit. Macbeth now warily admits his hope by the adroit use of the royal "we," and Banquo, having learned just as much as he wishes, cunningly evades committing himself in words. It is at this point that Macbeth first realizes that he cannot entirely trust Banquo, but that the latter will oppose no obstacle to the murder of Duncan. Banquo knows he cannot be king while Macbeth covets that honor, but, if Duncan is murdered by Macbeth, the latter will be completely in Banquo's power. Macbeth is aware of this; hence his attempt to bribe Banquo with promises of future honors. The two hypocrites take leave of each other with conventional phrases on their lips and a perfect mutual understanding in their hearts.

Macbeth makes all plain in regard to the dagger by what he says, he is made to admit that it is "a dagger of the mind, a false crea-

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tion proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain" to prove that he is still sane, and because *it would be inartistic and undramatic to introduce a visible dagger. It would weaken the effect already produced by the use of the witches to attempt to repeat it by the employment of any less exciting medium.* For the same reason, and to further demonstrate that the supernatural agencies are the result of excited and perverted imagination, no one but Macbeth hears the voice cry "Sleep no more," etc.

Act II, Scene III is entirely consistent with the idea that the play is an exposition of the pernicious teachings of the time. The Gunpowder Plot was the *cause célèbre* of the day and gave much publicity to the doctrine of Equivocation. "The primrose way" is an obvious reference to the Jesuitical doctrine set forth by Father Pinter that: "It was reasonable that under the law of grace in the New Testament, God should relieve us from that *troublesome* and *arduous* obligation which ex-

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isted under the law of bondage, to exercise an act of perfect contrition, in order to be justified; and that the place of this should be supplied by the sacraments instituted in aid of an *easier* exercise."

One of the doctrines advanced by Luis Molina, the Spanish Jesuit, was that: "God foreknowing what all persons would do under any and all circumstances, sends to perdition such as He foresees would remain obdurate, whatever exertions might be made to save them."

Even a drunken Porter appreciates the humor of the situation. Father Molina sends some of all professions to perdition, knowing it to be inevitable in spite of "whatever exertions might be made to save them," and Father Pinter makes the way to the everlasting bonfire easy.

The "rough night" on which the murder of Duncan is committed is not unnatural, but is exaggerated by those who are accustomed to associate with supernatural agencies the

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simple manifestations of nature. This is one of the commonest traits of the ignorant, the half educated and the superstitious mind. It is the origin of religion.

Superstitions in regard to birds, animals and insects were also very popular in England and Scotland, their commonest instincts being misconstrued and attributed to unnatural causes. The "Old Man" is introduced to show how these superstitions are handed down, like the national traditions and local dialect, from one generation to another; Ross representing the younger generation, which not only receives and cherishes, but endeavors to add to and embellish the traditions and superstitions of its fathers.

### ACT III. SCENE I.

Banquo's hypocrisy is further shown. He believes Macbeth guilty of the murder of Duncan and is plotting the undoing of Macbeth and the furtherance of his own ambition, yet treats him with the same respect that Mac-

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beth has lavished upon his intended victim. We hear so much about the "noble and incorruptible" Banquo that I have searched conscientiously for evidence of his virtue, but am unable to point to a word in the tragedy which proves him to have been better than Macbeth. Macbeth speaks of Banquo's "royalty of nature." He cannot mean that Banquo is noble and generous because he knows him to be a traitor. It is because of Banquo's wisdom, courage and cunning that Macbeth's fears "stick deep" and he determines to personally assist the two hired assassins. This view is confirmed by the fact that it is the third murderer who identifies Banquo and who knows the habits of all who enter the palace. He does not pursue Fleance for fear of detection, but takes it for granted the two hired assassins will do so, as they have been instructed that Fleance must share his father's fate. On the evening of Banquo's murder Macbeth has taken precaution to announce publicly that he wishes to be alone and undisturbed till supper

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time, so that no one may look for him and find him absent from the palace. In his conversation with Lady Macbeth, Act III, Sc. II, he says he will take chances on both this world and the next ere he will continue to eat and sleep in fear,—“better be with the dead than on the torture of the mind to lie in restless ecstasy.” He refers to the possibility of being killed by Banquo in the attack upon him in which he intends to play the chief part. He knows Banquo’s prowess so well that he fears to entrust his taking-off to ordinary assassins, and even fears for his own personal safety, but takes the chance rather than live in constant fear of exposure and defeated ambition. In the banquet scene the First Murderer boasts that he cut Banquo’s throat, but fails to say who gave him the “twenty trenched gashes.” When Macbeth sees the Ghost his first speech is, “Thou canst not say *I* did it,” meaning “it cannot be proven, because I was disguised, and it is known to no one but myself.” He has even refused to let Lady Mac-

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beth into this secret. It is not the gashed throat, but the "twenty mortal murders," and Banquo's "gory locks" which push Macbeth from his stool. "Take any shape but that and my firm nerves shall never tremble." And here we have the first symptom of insanity in Macbeth—a credited hallucination. Unremitting fear of exposure and continued loss of sleep have had their natural result upon a mind weakened and warped by superstition.

Macbeth personally stabs Macduff's boy. Lady Macduff's first words when the murderers enter her presence: "What are these faces?" refer to their masks or disguises. The First Murderer reveals his indentity when he speaks of Macduff as a traitor. It has already been shown in Act III, Sc. VI, in the conversation between Lennox and another Lord, that the people do not look upon Macduff as a traitor, and it certainly would not be the thing of paramount interest to a hired assassin. The term "shag-hair'd villain," applied to the First Murderer by the Son of Macduff, furth-



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er reveals the fact of a disguise, shag-hair being a kind of material used at that time for wigs. (\*) There could be but one reason for the repeated reference to a disguise in this short but important scene. Macbeth's identity is further established by the epithet "young fry of treachery." No one but Macbeth would look upon the Son of Macduff in this light.

When Macbeth endeavors to conjure the witches for the last time Macduff has refused to come at his bidding, thus declaring rebellion. Macbeth determines to exterminate the Macduff family, especially the Boy, who will soon be old enough to avenge any wrong done his father. Macbeth is desperate. As fast as he rids himself of one enemy another arises. He seeks to conjure supernatural aid, determined to know the "worst" or secure a sign of absolute safety. Prophecies of seeming impos-

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(\*). R. G. White: Shag-hair seems to have meant something more than merely dishevelled hair. 'For covering they have either hair or shag-hair'—*Pro integumento habent vel pilos vel villos.*—*Gate of the Latin Tongue Unlocked*, 1656, p. 46.

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sibilities were common in Scotland, the people who made them being clever imposters who preyed upon the credulous. About the time Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, the wife of Captain James Stewart, a Scottish Earl, consulted a so-called witch, who was evidently an adept in the science of semiotics, or the language of pathological signs. She pandered to the ambitious lady by predicting that she "would become the greatest woman in Scotland." As a matter of fact, a latent disease with which the lady was affected developed, and she died, evidently of dropsy, "being all swelled out in an extraordinary manner." (\*)

The same woman predicted that the lady's husband, the said Captain James, Earl of Arran, should have the "highest head in Scotland." The prophecy was apparently fulfilled, the so-called witch being well aware that Captain James intended to have extirpated the whole family of Lord Torthoral

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(\*). C. K. Sharpe: "A Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland."

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(called Douglass) who was, however, a man most likely and well able to defend himself and his family; which he did, killing James, whose head was, of course, carried high on the point of a spear, as was the fashion of the time. No one seemed to have been more familiar with these prophecies and their true value than Shakespeare, who exposed them so plainly that all who ran might read, using Macbeth as his medium.

The most impossible thing suggested by the diseased imagination of Macbeth is that his native forest shall be removed from one place to another. Most of all he fears Macduff; hence he conjures the First Apparition, or Macduff's head, which "knows" his "thought" and "harps" his "fear aright." Next he fears Macduff's son, whom he has decided to murder because of his bravery and brilliancy; hence the Second Apparition, a bloody child. There is no other reason why Shakespeare should introduce this Boy and paint his character so strongly. There are

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other "pretty chicks" in the Macduff family and Macbeth wishes to be assured that "*none of woman born*" shall ever harm him. After partially deluding himself into believing he has received this prophecy he exclaims: "Then live Macduff; what need I fear of thee?" but instantly retracts it because he knows it is not true, just as he knows he is not telling the truth when he says, Act II, Sc. III, "He does," and immediately amends it with: "He did appoint so"; and when he says, Act V, Sc. III,

"The mind I sway by and the heart I bear  
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with  
fear,"

and instantly falls into an agony of fear at the sight of one pale-faced servant.

Macbeth wishes to believe that it will be as impossible for Malcolm to return to Scotland as for Birnam Wood to move against his castle. He therefore imagines the Third Apparition and the prophecy. Still he is not satisfied. Fleance is alive and may leave issue to

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inherit the crown for which he has sacrificed so much. He tortures himself with this thought until he imagines the Show of Kings, reaching the climax of insane hallucination in the "blood-bolter'd" spirit of Banquo, in which he still believes.

It would defeat the purpose of the play to leave the audience in doubt as to the exact state of Macbeth's mind at this juncture, and Lennox is brought upon the scene for the purpose of testifying to the unreality of the witches.

Enter Lennox (from the direction in which the witches are supposed to vanish.)

Lennox: What's your grace's will?

Macbeth: Saw you the weird sisters?

Lennox: No, my lord.

Macbeth: Came they not by you?

Lennox: No, indeed, my lord.

It is thus finally demonstrated that all the supernatural agencies are but the materialization of thought. Macbeth partially realizes this himself and determines to seek "no more

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sights." That he has become a nervous wreck is also definitely shown in Act V, Sc. III, when, for the first time during the entire course of the play, he loses his native politeness and abuses his servant. It is an accepted fact that a man's politeness and suavity, when so strongly ingrained as in the nature of Macbeth, are the last traits to fall away from him while reason remains. Macbeth's frantic, excited state of mind is further shown in the same scene in his indecision about the armor. His stubborn *preference* for superstition and disrespect for science, as well as the spirit of the times, is shown in his remark to the doctor: "Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it." In 1605, or about the time that Shakespeare was writing the tragedy Macbeth, Patrick Lawrie was committed to the flames in Scotland for curing a disease which was supposed to be incurable. He was said to have secured the means from the devil. (\*) Such

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(\*). C. K. Sharpe: "A Historical Account of the Belief in Witchcraft in Scotland."

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instances were common in Shakespeare's day, when the laying-on-of-hands by a king or priest, and the hanging of a blessed coin about the patient's neck, was the kind of "physic" which was administered to the majority. The English doctor is introduced, Act IV, Sc. III, to testify to this milder form of superstition, which, under the guise of doing good, stood in the way of science and deliberately retarded the progress of the people.

All Macbeth's remarks to the Scotch Doctor are in the nature of sarcasm: "Cure her of that." That is: "You pretend to know so much, why don't you cure your patient?" It has been contended that Macbeth's reference to "a rooted sorrow" is evidence that he was aware that Lady Macbeth's sufferings were due to remorse. Macbeth would hardly have confessed to any one that Lady Macbeth had cause for remorse. He endeavors to mislead the Doctor by an intimation that Lady Macbeth is weighed down by some personal, mental distress, of which she might

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easily be relieved if the Doctor's drugs were as potent as he claimed.

Macbeth's indifference to the death of Lady Macbeth is another indication of insanity. It is not unusual for insane people to experience a complete revulsion of feeling toward those whom they love best.

Of those who claim that the last two so-called prophecies were literally fulfilled, it can only be said that they are even crazier and more superstitious than Macbeth himself. Malcolm's use of the boughs of the trees of Birnam Wood was a simple and not unprecedented piece of military strategy. Macduff *was* "born of woman," just as every man who has ever come into this world has been. It is *superstition, perverted imagination*, which defeats Macbeth at last, not the fact that Macduff was *prematurely born*. Had it not been that Macbeth had made up his mind to lose, he might have slain Macduff as easily as he did Young Siward.

It cannot be that Shakespeare offered the



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tragedy Macbeth as a warning against ambition, for ambition to excel by means of slaughter and blood-shed is extravagantly extolled and liberally rewarded in Act I, Scenes II and IV. The only mystery in the play is that a man who is a butcher by profession, a legalized, wholesale slaughterer of his fellow-beings, who is described in the *first* act of the play as a man who,

“Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d  
steel,

Which smok’d with bloody execution,  
Like valour’s minion *carv’d out his passage*  
Till he fac’d the slave;

Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell  
to him,

*Till he unseem’d him from the nave to the  
chaps,*

And fix’d his head upon our battlements,”

and who is made to say in the *last* act:

“Whiles I see lives, the gashes do better  
upon them,” should make such a fuss over the  
murder of six or seven victims more or less.

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But there seems to be no limit to the vagaries of the human imagination. Lady Macbeth appears to have shared this idea when she said, Act V, Sc. I:

“Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier and afeerd?”  
(To commot one more murder.)

The character of Lady Macbeth is much more difficult to understand than that of Macbeth. Her conduct can only be explained by the fact that she represents her sex during an age when it was the custom for a woman, of whatever station in life, to sink her individuality in that of her husband or, before marriage, in that of her father; to an age when man was lord and master and woman's mission in life was to serve him; to subordinate and sacrifice herself and her children to him and his aims and ambitions; to support and follow him, even in crime and villainy. This view is strengthened by Lady Macbeth's reference to her father, Act II, Sc. II, and the fact that in all she does there is no evidence whatever of personal ambition. Certainly

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she did not suggest the murder of Duncan to Macbeth. This is plainly shown, Act I, Sc. VII, in the two speeches :

“Was the hope drunk,  
Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept  
since?  
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale  
At what it did so freely?”

This might be construed to mean “at what it did so freely at my suggestion,” but,

“What beast was't then  
That made you break this enterprise to me?”  
proves conclusively that Macbeth had informed her of his wish and design; that the thought of murder originated with him. That Lady Macbeth, in spite of her false education, is a woman and not a fiend, as some would have us believe, and that she leans upon her husband much more than he does upon her, is manifested in her inability to bear the burden of dread and fear of exposure alone. When she becomes convinced at the banquet

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that Macbeth is unable to control his fancies, Lady Macbeth's spirit breaks and she never regains her courage. That she has idealized and over-estimated him is evidenced when she pronounces him "too full of the milk of human kindness."

I am unable to point to a single word in the play which proves that either Macbeth or Lady Macbeth ever experience remorse or repentance. They suffer nothing but fear of discovery. In describing Lady Macbeth, a popular critic says: "The power of religion alone could have controlled such a mind." The critic quoted has evidently overlooked the fact that Macbeth was a religious man, in the common acceptance of the term; or possibly she entertains the belief that what is bad for a man is good for a woman. It has never been found that anything but education, in the broadest sense of the term, serves to improve the mind of either man or woman.

Of the theory that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth had discussed the murder of Dun-

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can previous to the opening of the play it can only be said that such a plan would be in-artistic and undramatic—two things of which the author of *Macbeth* has never been guilty. Several of the important conferences in the play are duplicates, but none of them was duplicated before the opening of the play. Had there been a previous discussion it would be definitely referred to in the play, which must contain the whole story.

There is no doubt whatever that *Macbeth* broke his enterprise to Lady *Macbeth* in the letters which he wrote her. Act I, Sc. V, Lady *Macbeth* has read part of her letter before she comes on the scene. "They met me" refers, of course, to the Weird Sisters whom *Macbeth* must have named before writing this sentence. "They," to be intelligible, must have its antecedent, at least. *Macbeth* has plenty of Scotch caution and calculates all chances to the best of his ability, but he is a successful general with many trusty messengers at his command, and he has "thought good

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to deliver" his entire enterprise to Lady Macbeth in this letter, or in this and other letters. She says:

"Thy letters have transported me beyond  
This ignorant present, and I feel now  
The future in the instant."

In the sleep-walking scene, Act V, Sc. I, the waiting gentlewoman says:

"I have seen her rise from her bed,  
throw her night-gown upon her, un-  
lock her closet, take forth paper, fold  
it, write upon't, read it, afterwards  
seal it, and again return to bed."

Lady Macbeth's mind reverts in sleep to the letter in which Macbeth has broken his enterprise to her.

The chief personages in the tragedy, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were the victims of heredity, false education and environment,

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but, are we, with all our vaunted progress, in all respects wiser and better? We have replaced the sword with the gatling-gun and the dagger with the stuffed ballot-box. We no longer burn witches, but, we have our Dowie, et al.









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